

A CROSS-CULTURAL DIALOGUE OF SOCIAL PRINCIPLES¹

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Between 1972 and 2012, international discourse about the United Methodist Social Principles took place through the ability of central conferences to adapt the *Discipline* to missional needs and objectives.² The Social Principles documents in the central conferences were not simply translations of the same text into various languages but rather cultural adaptations of the General Conference witness. The multiplicity of Social Principles documents simultaneously in use throughout the “worldwide” United Methodist Church (UMC) prior to 2012 brings to light a meaningful, though neglected, cross-cultural conversation within the UMC.³

The history of central conference adaptations of the Social Principles in Europe illustrates some of the challenges facing the UMC as a “worldwide” denomination. At no point in the history of the UMC has there existed a single bookshelf or library containing all of the translations, adaptations, and adapted portions of the *Book of Discipline* currently in use across the denomination.⁴ Simply acknowledging this history is part of the challenge. In his textbook on doctrine, Scott J. Jones claims that the “The [Social Principles] document is intended to apply to all universally. The same principles must

¹ This article is an edited version of Chapter 5, “Cross-Cultural Dialogue and Adaptations,” of *Methodist Morals: Social Principles, Marriage, and Sexual Sin in the Public Church*, forthcoming from the University of Tennessee Press, May, 2016. It builds upon research I first published as “Face of Unity or Mask over Difference?: The Social Principles in the Central Conferences of The United Methodist Church,” in *Thinking About Religion* 5 (2005), accessed online, November 11, 2015, and further developed and presented as a paper for the Twelfth Oxford Institute for Methodist Theological Studies, Oxford, England, August, 2007.

² “A central conference shall have power to make such changes and adaptations of the *Book of Discipline* as the special conditions and the mission of the church in the area require,” *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2012* (Nashville, TN: United Methodist Publishing House, 2012), ¶543.7 (hereafter cited as UMC *GD2012*). I use the abbreviation *GD*[year] to indicate the “General *Discipline*”—that version legislated by General Conference, as distinct from adaptations and translations adopted in central conferences (see UMC *GD2012*, ¶31.5).

³ Only a few publications explore the phenomenon of adapting the Social Principles in central conferences: Rainer Bath, *Methodismus und Politik: die sozialen Grundsätze der Evangelisch-methodistischen Kirche als Ausdruck ihres politischen Engagements*, Theologische Studienbeiträge, 6 (Stuttgart: Edition Anker, 1994); Stephens, “Face of Unity or Mask over Difference?”; and Lothar Elsner and Ulrich Jahreiss, eds., *Das soziale Bekenntnis der Evangelisch-methodistischen Kirche: Geschichte - aktuelle Bedeutung - Impulse für die Gemeinde* (Göttingen: Edition Ruprecht, 2008).

⁴ This illustrates what Frank describes as the “fragmentation of shared polity” characterizing the “missional phase of the discipline of Methodism” (Thomas Edward Frank, “Discipline,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies*, eds. William J. Abraham and James E. Kirby [New York: Oxford UP, 2009], 255-256).

be followed regardless of which country or society is being discussed.”⁵ This assertion represented a hope rather than a reality in 2002. In contrast, Thomas E. Frank offers an empirical claim in his book on polity: “the Social Principles are written from a social and cultural point of view . . . [and] are American in orientation.”⁶ The US-centrism of the General Conference document becomes readily apparent through central conference attempts to translate and adapt the document. General Conference’s declaration in 2012, that the Social Principles is part of the global *Book of Discipline* and is thus not “subject to change or adaptation” except by General Conference, did not address this gap between aspiration and actuality and, in essence, circumvented a dialogue that had already begun.⁷

This article examines the intra-denominational conversation between multiple European adaptations of the Social Principles in the UMC prior to 2012 and concludes with a discussion of the challenges this multiplicity of witnesses presents to the worldwide UMC. This article’s analysis is based on the following adaptations of the Social Principles in Europe: the Germany Central Conference (in German, 1996, 2002, and 2005); the Central Conference of Central and Southern Europe (in German, 2005; in French, 1996, 2001, 2005);⁸ and the Northern Europe and Eurasia Central Conference (in Danish, 1993 and 1997; in Swedish, 2000; in Russian, 2001; in English, 2001 and 2005).⁹ As discussed below, the two editions in

⁵ Scott J. Jones, *United Methodist Doctrine: The Extreme Center* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2002), 229.

⁶ Thomas Edward Frank, *Polity, Practice, and the Mission of The United Methodist Church*, 2006 ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2006), 153.

⁷ UMC *GD2012*, ¶101.

⁸ “Soziale Grundsätze der Evangelisch-methodistischen Kirche 1996,” Kirche und Gesellschaft (Evangelisch-methodistische Kirche Schweiz/Frankreich), accessed online, April 3, 2006; “Soziale Grundsätze der Evangelisch-methodistischen Kirche (Fassung 2000/2002),” Kirche und Gesellschaft (Evangelisch-methodistische Kirche Schweiz/Frankreich), accessed online, April 3, 2006; “Die Sozialen Grundsätze: angenommen an der Tagung der Zentralkonferenz von Mittel- und Südeuropa 2005 der Evangelisch-methodistischen Kirche,” accessed online, October 2, 2015; “Soziale Grundsätze” in *Zentralkonferenz in Deutschland, Verfassung, Lehre und Ordnung der Evangelisch- methodistischen Kirche*, Ausgabe 2005, ed. Günter Winkmann (Frankfurt am Main: 2005), 77-93, accessed online, August 4, 2015; “Principes Sociaux de l’Eglise Evangélique Méthodiste 1996,” Kirche und Gesellschaft (Evangelisch-methodistische Kirche Schweiz/Frankreich), accessed online, April 3, 2006; “Principes Sociaux,” Eglise Evangélique Méthodiste en France (2001), accessed online, April 3, 2006; “Principes Sociaux EEM,” Eglise Evangélique Méthodiste en France (2005), accessed online, January 18, 2006.

⁹ *Metodistkyrkans lära och kyrkoordning* (Helsingfors: Metodistkyrkan i Nord-Europa, 1993), 97–116; *Metodistkyrkans lära och kyrkoordning* (Helsingfors: Metodistkyrkan i Nord-Europa, 1997), 103–128. *Metodistkyrkans sociala principer: Svensk version 2000* (Stockholm: Metodistkyrkans Huvudkontor, 2000). I am indebted to Diana Coogole of Rogue Community College, Grant’s Pass, Oregon, for her assistance translating the Swedish. *Narod Vero: Istoria, Konstitutsia, vera i sotsial’nye printsipy Ob’edinennoi metodistskoi tserkvi Severnoi Evropy* (Russia: Ob’edinennaia metodistskaia tserkov’ Severnoi Evropy, 2000), 46–66. I am indebted to the Rev. Natalya Shulgina, elder in The United Methodist Church in Russia, for her help in locating and translating this version. *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church in Northern Europe 2001* (Oslo: The United Methodist Church in Northern Europe, 2003), 123–154.

German in 2005 differ considerably. As a point of comparison, this article refers mainly to the 2004 edition of General Conference Social Principles upon which most of the above adaptations are based.

“A Dialogue Has Now Begun”

In 2000, the Executive Committee of the United Methodist Central Conference of Central and Southern Europe issued a call to accountability to the entire denomination regarding the social witness of General Conference. Through a petition, “Concerning the Meaning of the Social Principles,” they raised justice concerns about the relevance of a document written primarily from a US context for United Methodists around the world.¹⁰ This petition could have been more accurately titled “Concerning the *Authority* of the Social Principles,” since it took General Conference to task for legislating authoritatively on behalf of the entire church statements that clearly did not apply to those outside the United States. In this petition, the Central Conference of Central and Southern Europe asked General Conference to consider the diverse experiences and contexts of worldwide United Methodists when making ethical pronouncements and “to clearly indicate which part, or parts, of the [Social] Principles have the characteristic of being fundamental, . . . in accordance with the Gospel, and . . . therefore valid for all Christians.” However, those outside of Europe gave little notice, and the overwhelmingly US-constituted delegation at General Conference hastily referred the petition to the then-existent General Council on Ministries at the eleventh hour, without further consideration.¹¹

Unbeknownst to most United Methodists in the United States, European discourse about the Social Principles occurred not primarily at General Conference but rather through the ability of central conferences to adapt the *Discipline* to missional needs and objectives. The task of adapting a document written within and for a US context had been an important point of discussion in the UMC in Europe since the creation and embrace of the Social Principles by the 1972 General Conference. In 1973, the Central Conference of Central and Southern Europe decided that the Social Principles would not be included in its *Discipline* and that the document was not applicable to the central conference context, at least not without adaptation. It would instead function as a working draft from which to write a social witness for the European context.¹² The Germany Central Conference, which included both East and West Germany in 1975, also struggled with what to do with a docu-

¹⁰ Petition 31990-FO-NonDis-O: “Petition Number Search: General Conference 2000,” General Commission on Archives and History (UMC), accessed online, May 21, 2015.

¹¹ The General Conference 2000 plenary session referred this calendar item to the General Council on Ministries with a vote of 848 “yes” and 22 “no” (“Petition Number Search: General Conference 2000”).

¹² Excerpt of conference notes cited by Martin Roth, “Soziale Grundsätze: weltweite Gültigkeit und lokaler Kontext,” in Elsner and Jahreiss, eds., *Das soziale Bekenntnis*, 49–50.

ment specific to the US context.¹³ In 2000, through the above-mentioned petition, the Central Conference of Central and Southern Europe announced to General Conference that, since the fall of communism, “political, economic, social and religious principles” could now be discussed openly in Europe: “A dialogue has now begun.”¹⁴ That is, United Methodists in Europe had already entered into dialogue among themselves about the UMC’s social witness.

Charges of US-Centrism

United Methodists in European central conferences found the US perspective of the Social Principles readily apparent and problematic. As mentioned in the petition on the meaning of the Social Principles by the Central Conference of Central and Southern Europe, “The Social Principles were prepared and formulated by a Board of the General Conference, which itself consisted entirely of Americans. This means that the opinions and critiques were formulated from the perspective of the existing situation in American (United States of America) society.” This was a rather diplomatic observation, meant for a General Conference audience. In contrast, the introduction to a Polish adaptation expressed this concern bluntly, warning its readers that the Social Principles overwhelmingly represents an American point of view.¹⁵ Implied was a perception that European perspectives were not represented in the document, rendering it irrelevant on some points and simply confusing on others. The Central Conference of Central and Southern Europe considered the US cultural commitments of the General Conference Social Principles so prominent and problematic that it was considered an injustice to those outside of the United States. Their 2000 petition concludes that “If the General Conference . . . doesn’t wish to speak only to the Christians in the United States of America, then it must seek to do justice to the diversity of the world” by hearing and taking into consideration the diverse experiences and cultural perspectives of United Methodists from across the entire “worldwide” denomination.

The charge of US-centrism was not a new critique of the Social Principles. In 1985, Walter Muelder was critical of appeals to Americanism in the UMC and noted that this church was “largely preoccupied with domestic issues.”¹⁶ Indeed, the 1972 Social Principles originated within a study commission that

¹³ “Entwurf des *Arbeitskreises evangelisch-methodistischer Christen für gesellschaftliches Handeln* zur Adaption der Sozialen Grundsätze für die DDR 1975,” in Elsner and Jahreiss, eds., *Das soziale Bekenntnis*, 52–53.

¹⁴ Petition 31990-FO-NonDis-O: “Petition Number Search: General Conference 2000,” General Commission on Archives and History (UMC), accessed online, May 21, 2015.

¹⁵ “Kościół Ewangelicko - Metodystyczny w RP,” accessed online, February 2, 2005, <http://www.metodysci.pl/KEM.html>. A more recent version, with a revised introduction, is found at <http://metodysci.pl/zasady-socjalne/>, accessed October 2, 2015.

¹⁶ Walter G. Muelder, “The Methodist Social Creed and Ecumenical Ethics,” in *Wesleyan Theology Today: A Bicentennial Theological Consultation*, ed. Theodore Runyon (Nashville, TN: United Methodist Publishing House, 1985), 357.

did not include anyone from outside the United States in its membership.¹⁷ Paul Ramsey, a member of the Social Principles Study Commission, warned about the “irrelevance abroad” of General Conference’s particular dictates on social issues.¹⁸ The cultural specificity of the Social Principles became even more of an issue as the international constituency of the UMC (from Africa, Europe, and the Philippines) increased dramatically from quadrennium to quadrennium: 15% in 2000, 18% in 2004, 28% in 2008, 37% in 2012, and 41% in 2016. Yet the discourse at General Conference continued to be dominated by English-speaking US delegates and their petitions. Furthermore, despite a growing international presence, General Conference had never convened outside of the United States (though there are plans for this in the future). Acting on a more recent petition from Europe (see below), the 2012 General Conference decided to explore a rewriting of the Social Principles for a global context while also declaring the existing document to be globally relevant, despite evidence of US-centrism remaining in the document.

Evidence of US-Centrism

The most significant cultural feature of the Social Principles was its language: American English. The implied social context was one in which English is the predominant language, Caucasian/Anglo/white is the normative race/ethnicity, and the United States was the presumed context. As a Spanish-language translator of the UMC *Discipline* for use in the United States observed, “Naturally, the Discipline is the byproduct of the English-thinking mind, with its patterns of Anglo-American thought.”¹⁹ The Social Principles was a prime example of this, having been written and legislated by General Conferences that were overwhelmingly composed of English-speaking US citizens and were conducted almost exclusively in English. The Social Principles document was written from and to a US social context, as evidenced by cultural, political, and linguistic clues that point to its perspective and location.

The preface identified General Conference as the author and the membership of the UMC as the intended audience. However, a much broader and si-

¹⁷ For the members’ names and conference affiliations, see the following: “Statements on Social Principles,” *Engage* 2,20 (1970): 3; also James S. Thomas, “Report of the Social Principles Study Commission,” *engage/Social Action* (March, 1972): 14.

¹⁸ Paul Ramsey, *Speak up for Just War or Pacifism: A Critique of the United Methodist Bishops’ Pastoral Letter “In Defense of Creation”* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 1988), 8.

¹⁹ My own translation, with assistance from the Rev. Juan Huertas, from the Spanish preface by Reinaldo Toledo, translator and editor of *La Disciplina* 2000, the Spanish-language edition of the General *Discipline*. The original reads “Naturalmente, la Disciplina es el producto genuino de mentes pensantes en inglés, con sus patrones de pensamiento angloamericano” (“Reconocimientos,” *La Disciplina de la Iglesia Metodista Unida, 2000* [Nashville, TN: Casa Metodista Unida de Publicaciones, 2000], xv). This Spanish language edition, as well as a Korean language edition, was designed to be a direct translation of the General *Discipline*, for use within the US context.

multaneously not as diverse audience was implied throughout the document. In the Social Principles, General Conference explicitly addressed a wide range of readers: church members, particular groups within society, society as a whole, government, all Christians, and even all of humanity—although humanity was presumed to be located in an industrialized, English-speaking, democratic, capitalistic, pluralistic, constitutional society and nation.²⁰ What might at first seem a universal scope turned out to exclude those from outside the United States at many points. Whenever the Social Principles invoked the phrases “our society,” “our culture,” “in a society [implied: such as ours],” or “our government,” the implication was one society shared by author and audience, most clearly understood as the United States.²¹ The implied, fundamental community in the Social Principles was neither the church nor the family (although it is described as “the basic human community” in subsection II.A), but the community to which most of its appeals were made: US civil society. In short, this was a US document, both socially and politically.

Race and ethnicity also locate this document with cultural specificity. Throughout the General *Discipline* and the Social Principles, the label “racial and ethnic” was used to indicate persons who are not white. For example, migrant laborers were identified as “racial and ethnic persons.”²² Elsewhere, the *Discipline* defined “racial and ethnic” specifically as “American” persons who are not white: “Asian American, African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Native Americans.”²³ In the absence of a term for the most populous race/ethnicity in the United States (i.e., white/Caucasian/Anglo/Euro-American), these labels implied a white perspective as normative. Furthermore, as varieties of “Americans,” these labels only made sense within a US context.

While there was no explicit mention of the United States or its Constitution in the Social Principles, its preamble echoes it, beginning, “We, the people called United Methodists, affirm our faith” This affirmation asserted two identities simultaneously. “We, the people” echoed the preamble to the US Constitution, indicating US identity and implying some sort of connection between the two preambles and the documents they introduce. While the allusion was subtle, the phrase is so culturally resonant that any school child in the United States could continue the quote, “. . . of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union” The second half of this phrase, “the people called United Methodists,” echoed the early moniker

²⁰ Examples of implied audience in UMC *GD2004*, Social Principles, are often introduced by the phrase “we call upon”: nations with political power (VI.B), United Nations (VI.D), “Christians in every society” (VI.B), all governments (V.F), the state (V.B), “the agribusiness sector” (IV.H), employers (IV.E, F), consumers (IV.D), rural communities (III.N), legislators and health care providers (III.J), society (III.G), and “all persons” (II.G).

²¹ UMC *GD2004*, Social Principles, III.D, III.N, II.E, and III.R, respectively.

²² UMC *GD2004*, Social Principles, IV.F.

²³ UMC *GD2004*, ¶¶705.3i, 648.2. These terms are still used for jurisdictional members (UMC *GD2012*, ¶705.4b).

for adherents to Wesley's movement: "the people called Methodists." The result of this dual formulation was a powerful conflation of US and United Methodist identities.²⁴ Written in first person plural, this identification embraced both author and audience. It is not surprising that European adaptations balked at translating this opening to the Social Principles preamble without adaptation. Indeed, the preamble in the French (1996, 2001, and 2005) and German (1996 and 2002) adaptations begins simply, "We affirm our faith."²⁵ Without adaptation, the full, symbolic meaning of "we the people" would have either failed to resonate with European United Methodists or it would have caused them to wonder if one must first be a US citizen in order to be a United Methodist.

European Textual Adaptations

The US-centrism of the Social Principles created numerous translation difficulties, usually handled through subtle (and unacknowledged) editorial changes. Adopting the structure and tone of the General Conference edition, each adaptation expressed variation and emphasis within a very circumscribed set of editorial functions: additional prefaces, editor's notes, and footnotes. Wholesale alteration of the General Conference text was rare but significant when it happened. The many undocumented alterations in European editions of the Social Principles lent an air of institutional subversion to this discourse.

Each adaptation utilized almost identical headings, subsection titles, and organization. New subsections were never added by central conferences; in only one instance was an entire subsection omitted without any indication of such.²⁶ The unwritten rules of adaptation within the form of the Social Principles allowed for repetition, retention, rearrangement, addition, omission, and alteration of General Conference textual material. For example, the 2001 English-language version from Northern Europe emphasized the sentence on capital punishment by repeating it in an additional subsection of the document.²⁷ Retention of deleted text was a subtle means of improvisatory expression in European adaptations. For example, the 2001 Russian version retained the proscription on homosexual unions even though it had been moved to a different part of the General *Discipline* in 2000.²⁸ Rearranging

²⁴ This inference is reinforced by the UMC's doctrinal standards, specifically Article XXIII of the Articles of Faith, "Of the Rulers of the United States of America": UMC *GD2004*, 65.

²⁵ Earlier German editions translated this phrase as "We, the members . . . : "Wir, die Glieder der Evangelisch-methodistischen Kirche . . ." (*Kirchenordnung der Evangelisch-methodistischen Kirche 1974* [Stuttgart: Christliches Verlagshaus GmbH, 1974], 35; *Soziale Grundsätze der Evangelisch-methodistischen Kirche: Neufassung 1984* [Stuttgart: Christliches Verlagshaus GmbH, 1985], 5). The resonance, however, is much different than the literal translation of the Central Conference of Central and Southern Europe in 2005: "Wir, die Menschen, die sich *United Methodists* nennen."

²⁶ The 2002 German edition omits the subsection on HIV/AIDS.

²⁷ The sentence "We oppose capital punishment and urge its elimination from all criminal codes" was found in subsection UMC *GD2004*, Social Principles, V.A and repeated in V.F.

²⁸ Compare subsection I.I.C in Russian 2001, UMC *GD2000*, and UMC *GD1996*.

General Conference material within the document also served as an editorial or interpretative alteration. For example, the 2002 German text combined the subsections “Sustainable Agriculture” and “Family Farms,” implying connections between these topics not explicitly articulated by General Conference.²⁹ The 2002 German text also omitted the concluding phrase denouncing public lotteries in the subsection “Gambling.”³⁰ The adapted texts included no rationale or explanation for any of these adaptations.

For the most part, European adaptations of the Social Principles represented a discourse not of bold innovation but of quiet improvisation. The 2004 Social Principles presumed, for example, that “non-English speaking persons” were subject to unjust discrimination in the civil court system.³¹ This subsection had to be adapted for it to make sense in continental Europe, for this phrase would have been confusing or possibly alienating as a part of the UMC’s social witness in countries whose official language was not English. Even the 2005 German edition of the Central Conference of Central and Southern Europe, which in other respects is a direct translation of the General Conference text, adapted this subsection, expressing concern for those who do not speak the common language of the nation.³² Each of the footnotes in this adaptation pertained to something in the 2004 General Conference document that was specific to American English or the US social and cultural context: affirmative action, the US pension system, migrant workers, Koinonia Farms, the meaning of the word “drugs,” and various technical terms employed in debates about abortion in the United States.³³ The Danish adaptations dealt with some of these issues by declining to translate entire subsections. For example, the Scandinavian editors offered no translation at all for subsections “Adoption” and “Other Christian Communities,” simply referring the reader to the General *Discipline*. Koinonia Farms, an intentionally interracial Christian community in Georgia, USA, was sufficiently foreign to Scandinavia to be an ineffective illustration in its social witness. The Danish adaptations also rendered the phrase “separation of church and state” in quotes even while translating the words, indicating that

²⁹ Günter Winkmann and Paul Gräsle petitioned General Conference in 2000 to legislate this change in the General Conference edition of Social Principles, but their petition was not approved. Petition 31626-FO-64-D to General Conference 2000 (“Petition Number Search: General Conference 2000”).

³⁰ The full sentence from UMC *GD2000* Social Principles, IV.G, read: “The Church should promote standards and personal lifestyles that would make unnecessary and undesirable the resort to commercial gambling—including public lotteries—as recreation, as an escape, or as a means of producing public revenue funds for support of charities or government.”

³¹ UMC *GD2004*, Social Principles, V.H.

³² The 2005 edition of the Central Conference of Central and Southern Europe read, “die allen nicht der Landessprache mächtigen Personen.” A footnote translated the General Conference version literally. General Conference amended the Social Principles in 2008 to read “all those who do not speak the language of the country in which they are in contact with the law enforcement” (UMC *GD2008*, Social Principles, V.H.).

³³ Three of the footnotes were remarks by an editor and not officially approved by the Central Conference of Central and Southern Europe.

it was a foreign idiom.³⁴

A few topics in the Social Principles presented such culturally incommensurate viewpoints as to require complete revision in Europe. For example, the subsection “Work and Leisure” was rewritten by the Northern Europe and Eurasia Central Conference, as illustrated by a comparison of the 2001 Russian edition to the General Conference 2000 edition (see Table 1 on page 116).³⁵ The General Conference document asserted several times that “we support policies . . .” or social measures of one sort or another. In contrast, the Russian version’s advocacy for public policy was indirect, for example, “it is recommended that shortened workdays be introduced.”³⁶ This recommendation illustrates several divergent features of these documents. First, General Conference made a distinction between government and the private sector with regard to employment; the Russian edition did not indicate who should be responsible for introducing shortened workdays. Historically in Russia, government had been the sole employer, rendering unintelligible a distinction between it and private employers. Second, General Conference used the first person plural extensively, in contrast to the Russian edition, which used “we” only once. Third, the Russian edition emphasized “work,” while the General Conference text emphasized “leisure.” The Russian edition’s rationale for shortened workdays was to address unemployment, whereas General Conference advocated “that workers [be allowed] additional blocks of discretionary time” in order to address the need for leisure time.

Other contrasts include the Russian edition’s coupling of right *and* responsibility with regard to laborers, its emphasis on responsibility “to the common good” versus General Conference’s emphasis on “increasing freedom in the way individuals may use their leisure time,” and its approval of protests and strikes and a *sufficient and appropriate* living wage. Furthermore, the Russian edition did not share General Conference’s opposition to monopolies—government-controlled monopolies have traditionally formed the basis of Russia’s economy. Each of these adaptations reflects differences in social, cultural, and political contexts between Russia and the United States. These differences manifest themselves in distinct, but not incompatible, conceptions of human rights: rights to opportunities and freedoms from constraint versus rights as entitlements to basic necessities. None of these adaptations were documented as such in the text.

Such a thorough revision of the General Conference text by European United Methodists was a rarity, however. Only three subsections—“Work

³⁴ *Metodistkyrkans lära och kyrkoordning*, 123.

³⁵ See Russian 2001, Danish 1993, Danish 1997, and Swedish 2000 Social Principles for the adapted text. The Northern Europe English 2001 Social Principles provides the General Conference version of this subsection. Translation of Russian 2001, ¶163.C, by the Rev. Natalya Shulgina.

³⁶ Interestingly, the Russian version was very similar to a statement from the original 1908 Methodist Social Creed: “reduction of the hours of labor to the lowest practical point, with work for all” (*Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church 1908* [New York: Eaton and Mains, 1908], 480).

and Leisure,” “Human Sexuality,” and “Alcohol and Other Drugs”—were thoroughly rewritten by European conferences, illustrating some of the cultural challenges posed by General Conference’s social witness. Instead of simply adapting the Social Principles, the 2001 and 2005 French editions boldly presented dual texts for “Human Sexuality,” “Alcohol and Other Drugs,” and Our Social Creed, one version from the General Conference and one from the Central Conference of Central and Southern Europe. These French adaptations were the only versions of European Social Principles to offer dual texts on important issues of social concern, candidly admitting to and presenting divergent views within the UMC. Even the dual texts of the French editions, which appeared so carefully demarcated, slightly altered the General Conference version with no indication of adaptation. Furthermore, there were numerous undocumented changes in these French adaptations in other subsections of the Social Principles.

While many European adaptations hinted at active intra-denominational discourse, the vast majority of textual adaptations in the European versions of Social Principles were undocumented within the text. There was usually no explicit indication as to which parts of these texts had been adapted. For example, in 2002, the Germany Central Conference adapted what is perhaps the most controversial phrase of the entire Social Principles document, “we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching,” to read “[a] majority in the church interprets the Bible in such a way that it cannot approve of the practice of homosexuality.”³⁷ Through this adaptation, the Germany Central Conference narrowed the debate to Biblical interpretation, rather than Christian teaching more broadly considered, and lessened the sharpness of the statement by speaking in terms of disapproval rather than incompatibility.³⁸ The 2002 German document was the most extensively adapted of all European versions: fifty of its sixty subsections had been altered in some way. Many of these changes involved only a word or phrase; sometimes sentences were simply reordered within a paragraph or omitted altogether.³⁹ The Germany Central Conference’s adaptations evidenced an active conversation about social witness among the European conferences of the UMC. Yet none of these adaptations were noted in the text. European adaptations of the Social Principles might have contributed to the moral discourse of the denomination if they had been more widely known and recognized within The UM Church.

³⁷ English translation by the author. Compare UMC *GD2000* ¶161.G to “Eine Mehrheit in der Kirche interpretiert die Bibel so, dass sie die Ausübung der Homosexualität nicht billigen kann” (“Soziale Grundsätze der Evangelisch-methodistischen Kirche [Fassung 2000 / 2002],” Kirche und Gesellschaft [Evangelisch-methodistische Kirche Schweiz/Frankreich], accessed online, April 3, 2006.

³⁸ Here I am repeating an observation I made in “Moral Exemplar or Ethical Professional? Clergy and Sexual Sin in Methodist Church Law,” *Methodist Review* 3 (2011): 73.

³⁹ The fact that these alterations go beyond the inevitable linguistic hurdles involved in translating English to German is clearly evidenced by contrasting the 2005 edition of the Germany Central Conference with the 2005 edition of the Central Conference of Central and Southern Europe, which is a near-literal translation of the General Conference text.

Adaptation Challenges

In 2004, Jörg Niederer observed that Europeans were not of one mind on social issues and were finding it increasingly difficult to agree upon a uniform version of European Social Principles.⁴⁰ The connectional challenge confronting United Methodists outside the United States was not only between the United States and central conferences but also between and within central conferences themselves. Political pressures within the institution, translation expense, and debates over adaptations collectively threatened to end this practice even before General Conference did.

Adapting the Social Principles, the central conferences in Europe honored the General Conference version by making it the site of sustained moral discourse, working to balance intra-institutional diplomacy with social relevance. Prior to the reunification of Germany, the Germany Central found the General Conference Social Principles a challenging document to embrace fully, inspiring the need for creative adaptation.⁴¹ In 1994, Rainer Bath concluded his study of the Social Principles in the Germany Central Conference by noting that the German adaptation weakened the church's social witness and avoided "social politics" in the form of advocacy for specific social policies, suggesting that the UMC in Germany was less engaged in the socio-political realm than the UMC in the United States.⁴² Bath drew this conclusion based on the differences he observed between the Social Principles texts of General Conference and of the Germany Central Conference. Adapting the Social Principles, the UMC in a divided Germany was allowed to craft a more appropriate document of social witness for its context than would have been the case by merely translating the General Conference document. The fact that the General Conference edition still had normative valence eventually served to motivate this conference to strengthen its social witness with regard to public policy advocacy. The Germany Central Conference subsequently displayed a strong sense of its role in promoting social justice, observing a more positive relationship between evangelism and social action.

Even as they adapted the General Conference witness, United Methodists in Europe expressed a more complex moral discourse than the format of the Social Principles allowed, embracing multiple genres of social statements applicable to their contexts. For example, in 2005 the Germany Central Conference produced a document, "To the current social situation in Germany: A word from The United Methodist Church (in Germany)," addressing economic development and justice.⁴³ Likewise, the document, "A word of peace from the United Methodist Church in Germany," spoke to

⁴⁰ Jörg Niederer, "Die sozialen Grundsätze und das soziale Bekenntnis der EmK" (January 27, 2004), 7, accessed online, October 2, 2015.

⁴¹ "Entwurf des Arbeitskreises," 52–53.

⁴² See analysis by Rainer Bath, contrasting the 1989 German edition with the 1988 General Conference edition of Social Principles (Bath, *Methodismus und Politik*, 41–42).

⁴³ "Zur aktuellen sozialen Lage in Deutschland: Ein Wort der Evangelisch-methodistischen Kirche" (Wuppertal, February 18, 2005), accessed online, October 2, 2015.

issues of war, social destabilization, and justice.⁴⁴ Additionally, European United Methodists participated in significant ecumenical articulations of social witness, including “The Social Mission Statement” of the ecumenical churches in Austria (2005) and “Sustainable Society: A Guide for Study and Action” of the Church and Society Commission of the European Methodist Council.⁴⁵ These efforts existed in parallel with the need to adapt the Social Principles of the UMC.

For years, central conferences in Europe had deliberated about both the purpose and the extent of adapting the Social Principles. Multiple and competing adaptations of the Social Principles in Europe evidenced increasing debate about this practice during the three quadrennia leading up to 2012.⁴⁶ Each of the French editions (1996, 2001, and 2005) had moved successively closer to the General Conference edition and further from the 1996 German edition on which they were originally based. German-speaking United Methodists in Europe once shared a common adaptation of Social Principles, but in April, 2005, in Bern, Switzerland, the Central Conference of Central and Southern Europe issued a new German-language version of the Social Principles designed to be a direct translation rather than an adaptation of the General Conference edition. Prior to this time, German-speaking members of the Central Conference of Central and Southern Europe had simply adopted the adaptation written by the Germany Central Conference. No doubt, the debate over the degree of adaptation of the 2002 German edition, which altered 80% of the subsections of the Social Principles, was a significant factor in this independent action by the Central Conference of Central and Southern Europe.

Translation and adaptation is difficult and expensive work, especially when there are dozens of languages spoken in the UMC in Europe. A contrast in Northern Europe over an eight-year period illustrates this difficulty. The 1997 Scandinavian *Discipline* identified itself as the official version for the Northern Europe Central Conference and encouraged annual conferences to translate the book into their own languages.⁴⁷ Eight years later, the 2005 minutes of the Northern Europe Central Conference, which includes Scandinavia, stated that English was the conference’s official language and that the committee on *The Book of Discipline* would shift its focus from translation to remaining current with General Conference revisions and making recommendations for adaptation, as necessary.⁴⁸ In 2008, reflecting on

⁴⁴ Friedenswort der Evangelisch-methodistischen Kirche in Deutschland, n.d., accessed online, October 2, 2015.

⁴⁵ “Das Sozialwort” des Ökumenischen Rates der Kirchen in Österreich), accessed online, May 21, 2015; and “Sustainable Society: A Guide for Study and Action” of the Church and Society Commission of the European Methodist Council, n.d., accessed online, October 2, 2015.

⁴⁶ Though as Martin Roth notes, this discussion about the Social Principles had been going on in Europe since 1972 (Roth, “Soziale Grundsätze,” 48–51).

⁴⁷ *Metodistkyrkans lära och kyrkoordning*, 4.

⁴⁸ “Northern Europe Central Conference Complete Minutes 2005,” 97, accessed online, October 2, 2015.

the work of the Central Conference of Central and Southern Europe, Martin Roth indicated that quadrennial revision, translation, and adaptation was a difficult pace to maintain, the next version coming on the heels of the last adaptation.⁴⁹

The practice of adapting the Social Principles officially came to an end in 2012. In May, 2012, Bishop Patrick Streiff, on behalf of the European Central Conferences and the General Board of Church and Society, successfully petitioned General Conference “to lead and initiate a process to revise the Social Principles . . . with the goal of making them more succinct, theologically founded and globally relevant.”⁵⁰

Global Social Principles

The history of European Social Principles adaptations offers both challenge and opportunity for the UMC. One challenge is decentering the US perspective in the Social Principles legislated by General Conference. Bishop Heinrich Bolleter, in his 2005 Episcopal Address to the Central Conference of Central and Southern Europe, named “[r]eligion and national identity” as one of the primary issues that the UMC will have to face in the near future.⁵¹ He was speaking within his own context, but his remark applies to the entire UMC. The US flavor of the Social Principles posed a dilemma for a church claiming a prophetic voice within and a constituency beyond the borders of the United States. In 1961, Walter Muelder claimed, “American Methodism needs the corrective criticisms of both World Methodism and the World Council of Churches” in order “to correct the conformist tendencies of denominations within the various countries.”⁵² Today, the UMC has such a global correction within its own institutional structures. Members of the UMC in Africa, the Philippines, and Europe provide a corrective for the US-centrism that characterized the Social Principles legislated by General Conference. In the effort to make the Social Principles more globally relevant, General Conference has the opportunity to learn from the cross-cultural dialogue that had “already begun” regarding the Social Principles in Europe.⁵³

The dialogue begun in the UMC in Europe can promote an honest, self-critical reflection on the United Methodist Social Principles if United Methodists in the United States are willing to join in this conversation

⁴⁹ Roth, “Soziale Grundsätze,” 48.

⁵⁰ Petition 20986 was referred to the Connectional Table (“General Conference 2012 Legislation Tracking—UMC.org”).

⁵¹ Heinrich Bolleter, *A Living Fellowship - Because God Loves Life: Episcopal Address 2005*, United Methodist Church in Central and Southern Europe, 16, accessed online, October 2, 2015.

⁵² Muelder, *Methodism and Society in the Twentieth Century*, 399.

⁵³ For a report of this effort, see Heather Hahn, “Effort to make Social Principles more global,” UMNS (May 9, 2013), accessed online, August 11, 2015.

as equal rather than dominating partners.⁵⁴ Bolleter asserted in his 2005 Episcopal Address that “unity is not uniformity.” In developing a global version of Social Principles, the UMC has the opportunity to maintain a unique forum for expressing the social witness of United Methodists; to insist on uniformity may only serve to hide culturally significant differences in moral discourse within the denomination. Martin Roth suggests a way forward: that the Social Principles be written with a diversity of cultural perspectives; that it refrain from advocating for specific public policies; and that central (regional) conferences be authorized to develop specific public policy resolutions for their own contexts.⁵⁵ Will uniformity—a new, global edition of Social Principles—render this form of witness more or less relevant to United Methodists outside the United States?

In this light, the allusion to the US Constitution in the document’s preface can be read as a prophetic call to accountability. Whether “We, the people” can indeed speak for all of “the people called United Methodists” may well depend on the extent to which United Methodists in the United States can recognize, differentiate, and discuss the cultural commitments expressed through our Social Principles.

⁵⁴ There are many institutional pressures at work that complicate an open discourse among the conferences, not the least of which is a wide disparity in membership size and monetary support. See discussion in Bruce W. Robbins, *A World Parish?: Hopes and Challenges of The United Methodist Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2004).

⁵⁵ Roth, “Soziale Grundsätze,” 51.

Table A: Subsection “Work and Leisure” Comparison
(italics indicate discrepancies between the texts)

2000 General Conference Social Principles

Every person has the right to a job at a living wage.

Where *the private sector* cannot or does not provide jobs for all *who seek and need them*,

it is the responsibility of government to provide for the creation of such jobs.

We support social measures that ensure the physical and mental safety of workers, that provide for the equitable division of products and services, and that encourage an increasing freedom in the way individuals may use their leisure time.

We recognize the opportunity leisure provides for creative contributions to society

and encourage methods that allow workers additional blocks of discretionary time. We support educational, cultural, and recreational outlets that enhance the use of such time.

We believe that *persons* come before profits.

We deplore the selfish spirit that often pervades our economic life. We support policies that encourage the sharing of ideas in the workplace, cooperative and collective work arrangements.

We support rights of workers to refuse to work in situations that endanger health and / or life *without jeopardy to their jobs.*

We support policies that would reverse the increasing concentration of business and industry into monopolies.

2001 Russian Social Principles

Every person has the right to a job at a *sufficient* living wage.

Where there is no possibility to offer such a job to all,

it is recommended that shortened workdays be introduced seeking to accommodate the interests of all workers.

Every person has the right to a sufficient and appropriate wage for his or her work as well as the responsibility for carrying out that work in the best possible way.

[As the amount of leisure time increases in society, society is responsible for providing opportunities for its appropriate use. The church and its members have responsibility to assist families and unions to dedicate their lives to the common good.

We affirm the opportunities that leisure time offers for creative contributions to the *development of church and society.*]

Priority must be given not to the increase of profits but to *human needs*.

It is the right of every person to refuse to work in situations that endanger health and/or life.

Protest and strike must be used as legitimate ways for finding a solution when the way of negotiation is ineffective.